Trouble in Paradise – Appendix

Rural Office

TRANSCRIPT

Appendix is an expansion of the *Trouble in Paradise* exhibition presented at the Polish Pavilion at the Biennale Architettura 2021. It is the result of discussions with members of the six architectural teams invited to work on the project, which took place between March and April 2021. A year of waiting for the opening of the Biennale, postponed by the pandemic, prompted the participants of the exhibition to ask themselves to what extent the themes and solutions proposed in their projects are still relevant in the new reality. In the fifth episode we listen to the conversation between Rafał Śliwa and Niall Maxwell of Rural Office, authors of the *Społem* project.

POLISH PAVILION AT THE 17TH INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION — LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA
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Trouble in Paradise

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organiser: Zachęta — National Gallery of Art
Polish Pavilion commissioner: Hanna Wróblewska, Director of Zachęta — National Gallery of Art
Polish Pavilion office: Ewa Mielczarek, Joanna Waśko

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OFFICE BACKGROUND

Rafał:
Niall, I must tell you that from a perspective of a foreigner to the English Language the name of Rural Office seems a bold one, and bold to this point that it deliberately confronts with two ideas: first of an office set in the countryside and ultimately second which explicitly deals with the the rural condition, sort of marking the countryside the field of its agenda. And we both would admit that it is still today an unusual declaration for architects. How did it begin for you and what was the reasoning behind this decision?

Niall:
That's a really good question, because it often leads to a little bit of confusion, both with clients, but also with the perception of the practise within the profession. The answer is that when I moved to rural Wales in the mid 2000s, it was really just for a change in lifestyle, looking for some form of nirvana that clearly doesn't exist. But we were searching. We were in our early thirties. The name was really just a response to the former description that you provide, in other words, we are just an architectural practice based in a rural location. Hence we've got a rural office and that's what we're doing. We're doing architecture. Nothing more complicated than that. But of course, what's happened is that's almost been subverted by an audience who have then perceived what we do is rural architecture rather than just be based in a rural location. Actually we just absorbed that and accepted it. That is the perception that the profession and clients have of our work. More importantly, clients then approach us to do rural projects rather than urban projects. In the last 15 years, everything is rural, but one small project in London.

That's sort of the simple part of it. More importantly it was back in 2004, there was the Atlanta Olympics and I was sitting in a small house in Cardigan, which is right on the coast in Wales by the river, very, very beautiful, quite bucolic as a setting. We were watching a game of ping pong at the Atlanta Olympics on a computer screen through the Internet. We were sitting there thinking, we can run a business and we have connectivity. We don't need to be in a city. Within that time we accelerated to where we are now.

We've got a totally different digital geography that we're all having to try and inhabit and navigate. We'll probably talk about this in more detail about COVID, but in the last year that's really amplified the way in which people but also employers perceive the notion of work and perceive the way in which people communicate. Back in 2004, that was this kind of eureka moment thinking - This is possible, let's do it! The disconnect was between us sitting in a rural location and all of the work and all of the money being in a more metropolitan environment. The perception between the two was clearly not marrying up. It was a problem for us and still is a problem to a certain degree, but that's predominantly in a nutshell that the position.

Rafał:
Finding the position within the discipline was not the major reason behind the move to the countryside? It was rather through the result of being there, engaging with the context that unfolded in discovering the way to the practice in the countryside, because the interest to work in rural and remote areas didn't seem the priority then for you, or was it actually?

Niall:
I think there was a good helping of ignorance about this and naivety, which I think in many ways underestimated qualities. Because I think it's important to sometimes jump into a situation by being ignorant and thinking I am sure it will be fine. There's that side of things. The other side was that I was struggling to leave London because I was working on quite high quality cultural work or residential work. There was this fear of the unknown and fear really

of a different landscape I didn't understand and thinking how am I going to get clients? Where do people commission this type of work? Where is the relevant funding to support that? And when you were at that stage in your career, you're not necessarily that switched on to those dynamics.

Over time, we learned the hard way that actually we had to make our own buildings to communicate to an audience, that there was an alternative to the type of architecture that was being built in the countryside. And that's what we did predominantly through our farm. And then over time through clients who commissioned us based on the work that we were doing and saw the potential benefits of that. I don't think we set out to say we're gonna do rural architecture. It wasn't like that. It was very much that we wanted to choose a different way of living. We want to be much more in tune with nature and the seasons, and we want to have a family in the countryside, not in the city.

Rafał:
It sounds to me like somehow there is the interest and engagement probably to live in this condition. I think that in one of the presentations you had which I watched I remember you mentioning Samuel's Mockbee Rural Studio and the Architecture of Decency. It was a book that you discovered at a particular time in your life. I wondered whether this sort of idea of the engagement which is present within his work and his practise in the United States, was it also a reference point for your position, once you found yourself in the countryside? Because the idea of engagement is something that is very much emblematic of working in the tutal condition, perhaps because you have a sense of having more influence of close contact with the place of the people and also the kind of pace of life that it has. So did it play a role at that time?

Niall:
I think that's an interesting point, because I think the problem is there is sometimes a misguided perception about the rural condition. One thinks that it is necessarily kind of more inclusive, more together, that this community suddenly exists as this wonderful kind of collective. In fact, it's quite the opposite. It's quite isolating and quite lonely and it's quite raw because, of course, you're connected to nature in a very different way. Where we live and where my farm is, which is a kind of altitude for whales. It's very exposed and we are confronted by the Atlantic weather that comes into Europe. But I think the notion of being connected to a community.. I suppose the quality that is evident is that you're only as good as your last job and reputations are shared orally. It's not a website that people look at. It's actually word of mouth. The work we've done in rural locations, we've never pitched for any private work. It's always been - you need to talk to Niall or these guys are doing something interesting or have you seen that building? And that builds a network naturally.

But also it builds a reputation which has nothing to do with academic or intellectual prowess or anything, any nonsense like that. I think this is an important point, because when you arrive in one of these places, you are stripped of that identity. That's quite challenging for some people to reconcile. But it's also quite challenging to adapt. So we immediately had to understand that the kind of conversations that we would have, even with contractors in a more urban or metropolitan or civic environment, just didn't exist.

Instead it was about building relationships. Those relationships were as much to do with being in the pub, having a drink with somebody and understanding that you were on the same page in the way you thought. All the way through to knowing that there was a certain make-do mentality to the countryside of patching and finding solutions, which is almost contradictory to the way we think as architects when we're assembling an idea or assembling a building or resolving a technical solution.

So sometimes buildings are made with metal workers who are used to repairing machinery for tractors and farmers all the way through to specialist carpenters who are whittling wood on making spoons or chairs, who can also help with the building. That might sound romantic, but actually what it's doing it's a journey of exploration and it's a journey of you stripping yourself of preconceived notions of what the rural landscape should be, but also preconceived notions of how we build or how we make spaces or settlements. That's always a tension that I think is still with us and it's still with us because our work is, of course, changing as the career changes. It's a moving target.

Rafał:
It's so interesting to me that you mentioned the idea of the oral tradition, the kind of storytelling tradition, because it brings back to my mind John Berger's decision to settle in the countryside. He moved out of London, out of the political context in which he was active culturally, precisely to engage himself more with this different notion of the living where storytelling played an important role in the exploration of relationships between people and the land they inhabit. Somehow I see that there is a similarity in the interest to find another way to practice, a sort of different approach. That also brings me to the idea of togetherness and the project. Coming back to the Biennale, the title of your contribution is Spolem. Could you reveal more about it?

THE PROJECT

Niall:
Like for every project I suppose it's maybe helpful to explain how we approached this brief, which was an amazing brief. It's a brief that is so relevant to nearly every developed Western economy and it's obviously being looked at by other academics across the world at the moment. For us there was a kind of ignorance about Poland. In the UK, we have a particular perception of the Polish nation partly to do with the relationship we have with many Polish citizens that come to settle in the UK. More importantly, it allowed us to investigate the culture and history and of course, the more we read, the more we suddenly realised that there was a synergy with Wales. Both in terms of this wrestle for national identity, this sense of partitioning or dominance or resistance, but also this collective nature of communities, which is very evident within Welsh society and also very evident in the way in which oral tradition and spoken word and creativity is sort of shared and explained.

The more you kind of investigate something, the more you realise that actually there's an obvious answer. It's sort of there in the middle of all of this research. The notion of togetherness became really key. That was for a number of reasons. One was predominantly to do with your national identity, which I think was important for us. Secondly was because you were obviously the birthplace of the co-operative. 1816 was the first cooperative, which was if you actually look at it, 9 villages, 324 farms, 40.000 inhabitants or insane, kind of amazing collective which realised the value of collective endeavour.

Then it got politicised through the Spolem movement. And obviously we had [Edward] Abramowski who was writing about this, at the turn of the century, and this evolved into what became the predominant political movement of the 20th century. So for us, that was all self-evident and really, really obvious to understand that if we were looking at the rural condition, we had to look at the strength of bringing people together to deliver something rather than what you have at the moment, which is this sort of reaction, this capitalist reaction to the sort of state farms and this whole model of the communist era to land grab or to find a kind of private territory or to sort of demarcate something that is theirs and not ours.

So if we look at the commoning principles of how society was organised in Poland, and then we also look at the antidote to that, which is the sort of unfinished houses that scattered the rural landscape, in between them there is

an agency. That agency comes not necessarily through that generation, your parents generation or grandparents generation, but maybe our generation and even the younger children coming through. The idea that there may be a different future that they can have. Społem became just the very easy word for us to use because it's obviously the convenience store that you see all around Poland. And it was a lovely notion to build this collective as a starting point.

Rafał:
I very much like how you begin the description of the work with this manifesting quality. "We believe in the notion of togetherness, the spirit of working and living together, collaborating and sharing." Somehow the commoning, indeed, was the part of the brief and general curatorial strategy for exhibition. Just to explain: for the sake of this exhibition, we decided to divide the countryside into three spatialities - of territory, settlement and dwelling - and also to find the commons as an element that attempts to consolidate, to put into the horizontal relationships somehow equalize them. Your spatiality to begin with, a kind of entry into the project was dwelling - the basic condition of living. How did you approach that?

Niall:
Well, the obvious thing was hearth, and the hearth came out of really the research that we've done about the Zakopane region and Matlakowski, his sort of audit at the turn of the century of that region. I know that this region is really to the South and the territory has always been a little bit woolly.

But it was the most emblematic of national identity, this romanticism, where here was this beautiful region of a particular typology of architectural output in the rural. But within it, when you started to look at the analysis of it, you saw that he had diagnosed almost this description of black and white space. The idea of something that was contained, a retreat from the outside, this blackened room from the soot of the fire and this white space, which was this freer sort of summer space that allowed for exploration and creativity, so on and so forth.

The notion of the hearth sat at the centre of that. And then in amongst that were all of the other traditions that we saw within polish society - this wonderful ceramics tradition. How could we exploit that? It was sort of brought home to us on the psychological level when we realised that there was a members club in London called the Polish Hearth Club, which is the equivalent of the kind of elite society, and then why is it called the Hearth Club? Of course, because this is clearly a very distinct Polish sentiment and something that then becomes evident. That really was the starting point for the project.

Rafał:
And the moment when the togetherness and the commoning came, was the part of your research, which you did about the culture of the commoning. I think that the community-based approach is not the sole element of the work, but you also envision the minimum of state support for that.

Within this black and white, you denote the aspects which are black supported by the State or any form of administrative governance and then the rest is made by the individual, the white space of the living. This sort of relationship gives the way to how the settlement can be formed and organised, and there is the space in between the grey zone.

Niall:
You said it quite well actually, but I think it's important to break this down, because historically, culturally, your society is used to the notion of the pattern book. It understands housing from that period of the late communist era

has been delivered by the state, but actually having an element of choice. But it's not really a choice. It's almost a sort of pretending that you're developing a meritocracy when in fact, actually it's quite, quite the opposite. It's just a system of order.

That came out of partly, again, further research, but also our reading of Hansen and this lovely idea that Hansen, in his open form, was trying to create typologies that were reflective of Polish society at that point in time. I think there's a very famous one from his housing in Warsaw, which said: I got all of these different demographic groups, but I've also got the widowed mother with child and mother in law, which was a kind of a flat type or an apartment type.

At that point you get: oh, it's really interesting, because what it does is it gives you this sort of flex, to say: well if the hearth was the infrastructure that the State provided, then the vessel is the kind of housing association, the social provider, but actually everything else in terms of the choreography of life, which is what Hanson talks about, that's actually the individual. Or that's the co-operative working together to bring together the skills that they all offer, but also to collectively have a level of security over ten years and all of the other kinds of dynamics that come out of the housing model.

We felt if we could structure in that way, it leant on an understanding of the previous state provision. But more importantly, it pushed away from what is happening at the moment, the sort of claim of territory, the discomfort that exists where people are identifying a capitalist, very much Thatcherite model, which is obviously coming to almost the end of it in the UK. Poland is sort of moving into that sort of territory.

We were trying to find a way of bridging that gap - something that was reflective of how you used to live, but not necessarily a total free market position. The benefits to that is giving agency to the collective community, but also you're asking them to think about the space that sits between. When you use the word grey area, a really good way of describing the liminal space or however we want to categorise it. It is not for you, but it's for all of us. At the same time, it is almost a negotiation. And we all negotiate through communication every day. We're all having to find those relationships.

In the capitalist model, you can turn your back, you can sort of put your fence up and you don't have to actually engage with. Here we were saying: architecture's really just used as a facilitator for societal change. Maybe through this model, we can find a way of exploring that.

Rafał:
Exactly, I have a strong feeling, and it was already present from the early stage, here is precisely where the power of this project lies, in this sort of liminal space for negotiation. When we look into the domestic scale of your project it is certainly remarkable a celebration of living space, this kind of spatial richness reminds us of the Raumplan condition. If anyone who is listening to us now can look up the catalogue, which is available online and can see actually the images on which you somehow develop - the visual condition of living inside of the house. It's very rich. However, what happens when you get outside of the house and you're in between up to territorial spatiality? Could you develop this idea of how the settlement is related to the territory and what happens in between the settlements? Is there sort of also a communal agenda for this in-between?

Niall:
If we take the micro to start off with, because that's probably an easy thing to articulate. Again, go back to historical research. If you look at, for example, the work that Aldo van Eyck was doing at the same time that Oscar Hansen

was building a bench outside his summerhouse, both of these both understandings were about the liminal. They were both about trying to find the point at which we connect. And that was later seen in Hertzberg's work in Holland, where he was building the kitchen window with a bench outside so that the neighbour could sit and chat while you were cooking.

It's a very lovely device as a means of trying to break down those boundaries between private and semi private or public space. I think on an intimate level, that's easy. And I think also from the Polish cultural background, that I can't say the word, but the notion of commoning and effectively gardening together has been something that has always been a collective endeavour. And that's what we were trying to look at within the settlement to see that even if houses were of different scales or in different stages of development, that there was a shared endeavour that was constant and it was cyclical. It followed the seasons. There was a ritual to it, but actually everybody gained from it. So whether you were of more significant wealth and could build a significant dwelling on the settlement compared to somebody who had maybe a much, much smaller needs or demographically that you needed more than others, actually, all of the common ground was a shared entity and a shared endeavour. That gave you a different balance. Beyond that is a more difficult question to answer.

The maps that we draw - the first map, it's clearly said that this is a diagram of this black and white space. The second is sort of starting to identify the way in which different demographics adopt and develop their proposals. The third is then saying what happens on a broader scale? The reality is that like cities grow, there will probably be clusters which are these small commoning groups, and those clusters eventually over time will connect.

At that point, again, like the evolution of a mediaeval city, you're moving from disparate villages to suddenly becoming a settlement, suddenly then having to implement infrastructure and implement systems of organisation and order. We hadn't really taken it that far, because the brief allowed us to explore quite a lot in enough detail at this stage without sort of spinning it out into a much larger narrative.

THE PROCESS

Rafał:
I guess that it will come back to this idea of the infrastructure, and these elements pose within the house, but also within the landscape with their presence. I wanted to ask you about the process and the method of your work. As probably the listeners do not know that during the development phase, we decided to host workshops where we could talk and elaborate more in detail and in person the research and this process of the development.

I remember your impressive and really generous research on the commoning in Polish culture, as you mentioned, but also you brought a large variety of the other visual references and projects from the structuralist period in the Netherlands. I had in my mind that your method of work had the quality of bricoleur - making an atlas or a repository of a sort of elements to be assembled as a project in the end. Since all the references somehow found their way. These were loosely structured facts, objects. They had this creative tension, when they were laid side by side. Ultimately, it somehow reminded me of this notion of bricoleur that Claude Levi-Strauss writes about. He underlines that this is the vernacular condition of making new objects from the existing, making new elements from all that you collected. Ultimately architects are those who are collecting the images, collecting the ideas, collecting facts and assembling them together in new forms, in new ways. From the process to project, is this a sort of your normal methodology of work?

Niall:

I think you've hit the nail on the head in many ways, because as an evolving practice, which is moving from being just me really working, supported by people to bringing other people into a conversation, this project and a few recently in the last couple of years that allowed us to explore a much more open conversation.

I am really then sitting in the middle drawing people to make decisions about things. I think that the bricolage is a lovely example of the way in which we work, where we are trying to draw upon a wealth of reference without trying to look clever, but instead try to make sense of things. In the early years when I was living here and I would be driving a lot around Wales, I would be absorbing a lot of information and trying to articulate what that meant to me.

Part of it was trying to make sense of things that weren't beautiful, that weren't in any way appealing or aesthetically appealing, but to sort of intellectualise that to make sense of why things are the way they are and how things evolve. What you discover through architectural research as much as cultural research is that those things sometimes are soaked up. There's a great quote by Herbert and Greene, I think it is, two architects that used to work in Norfolk in the east of England said, how do you go about designing these buildings in these rural places that sort of look like they reflect the vernacular?

He said, I don't really, I just sort of soak it up. And it was a great way of describing architecturally how we are reliant on our unconscious to feed our conscious decision making. And I think this is probably the most important thing that I learnt in the last decade was how to have confidence in what I think when I'm not awake or when I'm thinking about other things my brain is busy with other stuff. Then how to work out how that fits together as architecture.

Then he gets into this other conversation, which is about the gut or the kind of the sense of a feeling - to say this feels right, this feels like the right direction. It's not just about what looks good or what we think is clever and smart or what we look fantastic in presentation, but instead what feels right, full of response to the research that we've done. All projects go through this process, whether they're a tiny extension to a house or whether they're a museum, they all have the same depth of research because without that, we are useless.

And without that, I don't think we can be informed enough to advise people who are our clients as to what they need to know and understand about their own building or their own project or their own strategy. So it is a really, really important part of practice and something that I really enjoy. More interestingly, is actually we've migrated away from just doing buildings over the last few years to doing a lot of strategic work. The strategic work is perfect for this type of in-depth research because it allows you to communicate very quickly on a different level, a lot of points of reference, but more importantly, that you are the person that's making the vectors, joining these together and then making sense of it for people. That's all we are. We are just communicators, you and I, we both know that's what design is. It's about good communication and understanding how to articulate an argument or a narrative through the built form.

THE REPRESENTATION

Rafał:
I think something I learnt by looking at your process is that this kind of atlas, a repository and general generosity and open mindedness are revealing themselves the longer you look at the work, the more time you spent with it, its richness finds its way for the project. If we will come back to the images and to the models within the exhibition, what would be the references that maybe you would like to bring? Readers might find Oscar Hansen, Władysław Matlakowski present within the description, but there was more that you elaborated about, like Diagoon House by Hermann Herzberger.

Niall:
Diagoon House seemed to come up almost every week in the office actually. In fact I was doing a master class at the Bartlett last week and introduced a student to this project because she was dealing with exactly the same headache of how do you create a home that is capable of changing with you as you change with life, as your needs change, as the number of people living with these changes, as technology changes and this idea of these very simple service calls which also deal with circulation, create this lovely split-level home. It's a brilliant piece of architecture, obviously by one of the best architects of the 20th century, no doubt. But I suppose it's an important example of where we all would like to be, of moving this sort of repository of thoughts into an architectural response. When we were looking at the scheme, we were saying, if we started by saying the hearth is our infrastructure, how do we cope with that? How do we make that evident to people? The state provides it. We know that the state is inherently working at a different drumbeat to the private sector. Therefore, we have to allow for a solidity, different scale of pace, of delivery, all of those things, but also that they would have to be some set form of pattern book that said, it's a type A, type B or type C hearth and that structural solution provides you with what you need.

As part of our research, we started to look at certain traditions, certain folk traditions that existed in Poland and how people marked territory or how people marked their buildings to put away evil spirits or to provide a particular identity to their private territory. We thought that was rather a lovely way in which we could start to articulate certain aspects of these symbolic hearths.

Ironically, they are similar symbols that are used in Welsh cultural houses that we see in all of those living museums when we move around. Again, we were drawing things that were of interest to us to sort of put them together. Then the next thing to explain is the three images when you read them as a group. You can see each image from the other image and that's really important. So we were looking at the Dutch school in terms of paintings to examine how they're always trying to draw your eye to a different depth of field.

So if you're looking in the main house, the main house has a view out to the courtyard. The courtyard is the second image, which has a view into the sitting room, but also has a view towards the landscape and so on. They were always connecting the three. So they could be spread as a triptych if you wanted to, but they could also be read individually or they could be seen collectively in different ways. Beyond that, when you start to look at the assembly of the interior and the way in which they're built, they're trying to deal with the balance between something that is built for you and something that clearly is a reflection of your own personality.

Whether that be the way in which things are assembled or the photograph of the pope and all of these kind of sort of trappings of domesticity, which were becoming evident through the other research that we were doing at the time, which was understanding the recording of the of society in Poland during the post-war lifetime and seeing how we could reflect that within the interior of the space. Then the final bit of that was obviously to wonder whether we could make an architecture that was similar to Enzo Mari, the idea of the readymades or the assembled furniture that could be made by anybody. How could we make an architecture that started to also reflect that? Hopefully you can understand that we're teasing out of ourselves as we're going along in the designing process. How this repository of ideas feeds in without it becoming too crowded with too many points of reference.

Rafał:
After all, I found it pretty well articulated. Interesting point with the interrelations between the images, because they indeed have the quality of informing one another, leading the eye. Following the media, you used the model as a

different tool here to represent the idea. It had a quality reminiscent of Piranesi representations, a work in ambiguity that you can't say whether it is under construction or it is already a derelict, a ruin.

Here the idea of the infrastructure returns. These seem to be the elements working in two spatialities. Obviously the media providers on the one hand. On the other hand, there are these totems anchored in the countryside, anchored in the land as a point of reference, reminiscent of an important tradition of marking a place in the landscape, as an orienting point. At the same time, it is a symbolic element. The idea of the totem.

Niall:
There were three parts in the model which are really important to explain. One was that the totems are very sculptural, intentionally so. We wanted the model to be read as this artefact, a beautiful kind of piece that sat almost like a piece of sculpture within a museum. But at the same time, when you started to read into it, it was also like a puzzle or it was like a game. So the puzzle was on the floor: each cube can be reorganised. The pattern that is across the territory or the common can be changeable. But there was also the third thing: it was more like a chessboard. It gave you the opportunity to see this as a form of negotiation where if you wanted to, you could take all of those pieces out and reconfigure the board in a different way. You would end up with the same number of pieces just reflecting the needs of that different community.

I think this is a really important point, because on one level, you think, well, that's quite clever and intricate, but actually it's telling us a lot about that sense of negotiation, but also the way in which if I took all the pieces out and asked you to put them back, what you put back would be different from me. And this is really important because it's about how we negotiate, how we form an understanding of what each individual needs when in fact we're all totally different as human beings.

That's not always evident within our role as architects and even to the point where it's not necessarily relevant if we look at any of van Eyck's work or Hertzberg Square, where they put everything in place and then you come to Hansen and all he does is articulate the failure of the system. He had all the ideas, he had all the methodology, but he couldn't deliver the output. The output is really important to us.

In other words, states have done one thing, the housing does the other, but actually the community has to do this negotiation to allow this to be successful. Otherwise, you follow the typologies of all other failures of post-war housing, and we have plenty in the UK, even the work of Erskin up in Newcastle in an area called Byker. Fantastic housing scheme, but it's now gone through the second generational change. It was hugely successful because it was built and developed with the community, with the architects based in the pub in the centre of the settlement, working with everybody to understand what they needed before all of those tendencies changed and it descended into criminality and lawlessness, before now slowly coming out of that process again. This is reflective of many post-war housing topologies and something that we were really keen to avoid falling into the trap of. The model is trying to be symbolic in describing the three things that I've tried to articulate.

Rafał:
It is so interesting. Now it occurred to me, I didn't think about it before, but when you've been speaking about the community and the generations at the end, I had in my mind the reading of Aldo Rossi reflections of the permanence of the architectural work. Permanent by the meaning that it resists time and it is embedded within culture, ages with culture and is supported by the community becoming part of the process of the community building. Rossi's idea described three aspects that contribute to building the urban artifact - the site, the symbol and the event.

What made people from his point of view related to a particular space and made the buildings permanent within the cities and its culture was the idea that the buildings were well embedded in the site and already engaged with the event, which gained its symbolic representation within the collective memory and consciousness. The presence of the symbolic element is meaningful to sustain the presence of particular architecture within the culture and society, but also with the form of the city, town or village. Maybe there is also the sort of reading of local memory as an important element in strengthening the bonds between people and maintenance of the particular structures and systems that provide the space for inhabitants to develop in continuity.

Niall:
I think you're picking up on two really strong themes. One is about identity and ownership. And the other is, of course, about the way in which engagement strategies are developed during the design process. To give you an example, at the moment, architecture generally gets criticised for doing engagement as something that we have to do with the community before we get on and do the serious design work. But at the moment, we're working on a museum master plan, which is a participatory design process where we're having to make the design decisions based on the collaborative feedback we were receiving from the users and the different client groups.

What that brings to the table is a very different process because it's sort of democratising the process of design, but it's also levelling out the individual, like the architect of the design team, as being one of those contributors or purely just as the facilitator. I think this is a really important aspect to this project, because as you can see, there is no kind of architectural response. There's no great, great gesture that we're providing.

We're actually just playing out scenarios to suggest how it may evolve, because actually our role is very much background. Hence, if I can go back to the model, that lovely idea of a game where you're setting the rules, and maybe we should have written you a rule book for how to use the model, because that would have been maybe our design response, beyond the notions of what we think will happen and the type of architecture and the aesthetic interior and what have you. Actually the most important is we as facilitators can both provide the symbol, the hearth and the totem, but also provide the event, the game all the way in which the community engages.

It feels like in Western society that whole physical and spatial conversation has gone over time, especially in the last 20 years. Then even more so in the last year, where we all kind of had to be relying on a digital kind of communication device to articulate anything, whether it be positive or negative. That maybe too many things to discuss in one or two sentences, but I think it's a really important level of agency that the community receive through this design process and probably actually what Rossi was trying to understand, but at the same time giving them this physical element to provide that sense of ownership, to provide that identity. As a result, the settlement or the community start to build an agency because of that.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Rafał:
To me, this is precisely the project even more for today than for tomorrow, because of its pragmatism and because it tackles the ideas that are current and perhaps urgent. As we are speaking of today, one thing that has to be mentioned is that the moment when we finished the project was exactly one year ago. A year has passed and we are still in this suspended pandemic period. One question that I think everyone who works in this postponed exhibition is struggling with is whether you would change anything, the ideas or change anything within the project? Is there

anything from the pandemic experience that would influence the work as if you knew before the pandemic would you change anything?

Niall:
I think in the end the answer is no, and partly because at the beginning of the project, we kind of communicated to you and the other participants that this understanding that the rural landscape has changed forever, because of the way in which our relationship with digital communication has transformed and freed us from this kind of different type of geography, which constrained us before that of distance that of perception that of skill sets, that of education, poverty, all of these factors. Suddenly there is a choice mechanism to allow you to inhabit the rural landscape and also to use it as a canvas for creativity, for job creation, for industrialisation, whatever it may be. That really hasn't changed. In fact, it's probably gone towards this more so. We've seen even just anecdotally, the number of people who are moving from cities to these rural parts understanding that I don't need to be in my rabbit hutch apartment in a city, because actually all of this amenities, that I can be living in the vast wilderness and still have a level of freedom, but also still have a range of stimuli that are reflective of my needs.

The pandemic in many ways has just reinforced the way we think anyway. I think a lot of changes that are going to be happening in the workplace and in the way in which we use logistics and the way in which we use transport and infrastructure, they have just been accelerated. They've been accelerated exponentially. So all of those platforms like Zoom are really just going to become part of our everyday life. We don't know the impact of that yet, both on health, well-being and all of these other factors, but we do know that it's going to change cities, but it's also going to change the rural. I think for the better, because what it will do is start to bring this balance back. For me, where we are living at the moment in Wales, we are the poorest region in Europe. Then you have to start thinking about how they calculate this? Of course, what they're doing is they're calculating it on the median salary of the U.K., which tells you that all of these incredibly well-paid jobs are within a very small part of the U.K. and they have a massive impact on the way in which you measure disparity. Whereas, in fact, what we're seeing over the next two years is the kind of equalling out or levelling out, so that it becomes much more reflective of the way society would have been in the past.

Rafał:
I have been wondering about the articulation of the role of the countryside and the shift of the conditions of living and working, as you spoke of that. Do you think that there is any expectation of the new condition that will arrive? Or are we simply so used to the past that we do not want to change our habits and we somehow expect to return to the living and working as we remember from the past. What are the possibilities on the horizon?

Niall:
I won't talk about Poland in this situation, because I think it would be out of turn for me to try and project what I think will happen with Polish society. I think I can only look at it from our own personal perspective. I think two things are going to be evident. One is there's going to be obviously a greater industrialisation of the rural area, which is obviously being covered by O.M.A. and others within the recent research that was projected at the Guggenheim in New York. That is already happening. That is happening partly to do with the economies of scale and the reality that farming as we know it doesn't really exist anymore. And if it does exist, it's dying. It's dying in that sense of small family farms still being economically viable for people to operate. The only reason it exists is because of lifestyle choice, where people are taking on small holdings to allow them to exist in the countryside, to live out a particular set of values. What's also happening is that all the regional settlements and service centres, as we call them in planning policy, are dying. The reason they're dying is because the banks have left, but also because, of course, all the consumer habits are changing. Our relationship with shops has changed. Either we are moving towards a delivery

model, where both our food and our needs are serviced by others arriving with goods or we are just focussed on a food related economy and also a trade economy. In other words, the ability to go and enjoy something, whether it be food or high end clothing or craft or what have you.

I think what will happen is that the countryside will move to being more of a kind of cultural playground. That will be driven by inward migration. That by itself will hopefully then start to build a certain level of economic regeneration. That will change the way in which we live and also occupy the buildings and the settlements and then the surrounding landscape.

But there is no way of changing our relationship with the land mass, which will predominantly be delivering our food on a mass level, which is already happening either through these super dairy farms or through very, very large collectives that have been built to graze your crops, but more importantly, through energy. The growth in turbine's the growth in photovoltaic arrays across the whole landscape are becoming more economically viable for farmers to invest in than to undertake traditional practises that they have for many years.

And we know obviously from the research that we did on this project that obviously you are also going through a similar situation, but on a global level. In other words, you've got large multinationals taking over huge swathes of land and farming on an unbelievable scale, almost a North American scale. What that also starts doing is changing your communities in a way in which they are only there to service that or are living almost autonomously cheek by jowl with that landscape solution.

I think that's the way we imagine it happening over the next 20 years. I think it's going to happen probably quicker than we anticipate.

Rafał:
Thank you so much, Niall. It has been an insightful conversation. It has been a pleasure.

Niall:
Is always great to talk to you, Rafał. Thank you for having us.
